The College Commons Podcast

Charlie Scheidt: Hidden in the Armoire – Living History of the Shoah

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Introduction: Welcome to the College Commons podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect, the Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, your host.

Joshua Holo: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons podcast and our interview with Charlie Scheidt. Charlie Scheidt is the chairman emeritus of Roland Foods, the company founded by his parents in nineteen thirty nine. Among his leadership roles, Charlie is active with the Leo Bek Institute and sits on the board of the Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities. On her deathbed, Charlie's mother, the last survivor of the generation of the holocaust, directed him to files from an armoire. Twenty years later, together with Austrian filmmaker Kat Rohrer, Charlie began to investigate those files. Together, the two began a journey of discovery, retracing his family steps through Germany, France, Holland, and ultimately to the US. The result is the book Inheritance, Love, Loss, and the Legacy of the Holocaust, which came out in March twenty twenty six from Rutgers University Press. Charlie Scheidt, thank you so much for joining us on the College Commons podcast.

Charlie Scheidt: Thank you, Josh, for inviting me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Joshua Holo: James Waller of the University of Connecticut introduces us to your book in his foreword, and he picks up on two recurrent salient themes surrounding the holocaust in many contexts. The first is the need to humanize a civilizational tragedy on the one hand, and the second is the self contradictory impulse of the holocaust's direct heirs, that is to say, the children of survivors, both to know and not to know. By way of introduction of yourself to us, Charlie, walk us through your personal experience as a son, as a student of history, and as a Jew of both wanting and not wanting to know.

Charlie Scheidt: Josh, I think in my case, the desire to know always was there, but there was such a pervasive sense of silence that the subject was too hot to touch, that nobody really

wanted to talk about it. So that I grew up knowing the basics of my family history, and it was just a sketchy outline. For example, that my father fled Nazi Germany out the back door across railroad tracks and started a new business in Paris and that they came here to the United States before the beginning of World War two. I didn't know anything about my aunt and uncle, who I was very close to, and my grandparents, neither on my paternal side nor my maternal side. But this pervasive sense of don't touch it, don't go there, limited any questioning or any questions. And when I inherited the incredible collection of documents that my mother told me about on her deathbed. I very much wanted to find out what was in there, but it was overwhelming. And I was busy. I was raising a family. I was running a business. I had a lot to do, but I would dip into it from time to time, always with the knowledge that this is something that I definitely wanted to do.

Joshua Holo: You tell us of a haunting prelude to your book in which you visited your father's former office in Frankfurt. Tell us the story of that seminal visit in two thousand and nine, and begin, if you would, by telling us why his office was empty when you came upon it.

Charlie Scheidt: If I can go back just one step, I was actually invited to Frankfurt by a historian who worked at the Historical Museum of Frankfurt and had become very interested in my family history and in this trove of documents that I had inherited. On her own initiative, she did research, sent me photographs, sent me copies of documents that she found in archives, And it is she who invited me to Frankfurt repeatedly, and I finally accepted in two thousand nine. And she arranged a visit to my father's office, and it's there that one of the really pivotal events occurred. We went upstairs, on this creaky old elevator, entered this space which was empty, didn't have a tenant at the time. I wandered over to the windows and looked out and saw railroad tracks. And that was a moment that I hadn't thought about the story I grew up with about my father fleeing across the railroad tracks, but here they were. And it confirmed to me the necessity, and I choose that word intentionally, the necessity of dealing with the trove of documents and making time to do so.

Joshua Holo: We're gonna get back to those documents and other sources in a minute, But I wanna shift gears a bit to the process and the experience that you had of discovery together with Katharine Lor. And central to that experience is your encounter with other heirs, non Jewish heirs to the holocaust. And I'm thinking in this case of your research partner herself, Kat Rohrer, who was a non Jewish heir to the holocaust in a certain way, but also to those whom you met along the way, such as young non Jewish tour guides, for example, charged with the preservation of memory and responsibility. What did you learn from these people that only they, as opposed to Jewish heirs of the holocaust, could teach?

Charlie Scheidt: Let me start with Kat. She grew up with a burden of being on the wrong side of a genocide. And she had to cope with that as did her mother and her aunts and in appreciation on my part of what that meant to her. It's hard to grow up with silence as I did, and it's hard to grow up with not knowing so much about your family history and sensing the anxiety in your parents. But I now have a a great appreciation for the burden that somebody like Kat carries. The other non Jewish people are remarkable, and I admire them immensely. For example, the teacher at the school that my cousin attended who has collected the stories of the Jewish kids who attended that school, what happened to them during the Nazi years, and how few of them, unfortunately, survive. We met guides. They're not professional guides in small towns across Germany who volunteer their time to maintain the Jewish cemetery and help the families of victims to reconstruct their family history. When we repeat, they are volunteers. They do that on their own time and were very generous with us. People invited us into apartments in which my family had lived. They had no obligation to do it. They responded to an inquiry. They opened their door to us. It enriched my experience immensely and that I'm able to convey that in in the book. Nothing replaces being in the space that family members inhabited and imagining them there, understanding what it meant to have that home and to be forced to leave that home. I'll add one more. We were invited by non Jews to the house that my aunt and uncle rented in the summer of nineteen thirty nine on the Normandy coast. We were not only invited to see the house, but we were invited to sleep there. So we spent one night actually in the house and to sleep in the bed that they may have slept in. And the house was in original condition to sit in the garden that my aunt and uncle described in letters that they wrote in the summer of nineteen thirty nine, shortly before the blitzkrieg began, shortly before the fall of France. And for me to sit in that garden is is is an incredible experience. And your question was about people, people inviting us. If I may give any advice to somebody who wouldn't do this and would want to explore their family history, make sure you convey very clearly that you're not being judgmental, that you don't care what their grandfathers or anybody else did. It's about who they are and who you were.

Joshua Holo: It's a very moving testament to the power of repair and responsibility. I was moved by your book, not only because of the story itself, but also because of you, specifically because on every page, I encounter the spirit of an historian. As you yourself write, origins matter. And in this historian spirit, you foreground primary sources, documents, headstones, photos, buildings, testimonies, and others. Of all of these different types of primary sources, which one transports you the most powerfully, the most viscerally, and what?

Charlie Scheidt: That's a very interesting question. I think I would focus on the first person letters and the personalities which emerge. They may be my family, but they're they're amazing and they're unique, And the way they express themselves is so direct, and they're

in letters. Thank god they didn't have emails back then. They put it all out there, and they got mad at each other. They misunderstood each other. They're demanding. But in the end, there is such love between them and such support and such understanding. Those letters speak volumes about the ability of family to communicate and to stick together in the most trying of times.

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Joshua Holo: Your father, Bruno, was a remarkable talent. As a refugee in France, he was able to found the company that would ultimately give its name to your family business in the US, that is Roland. And, indeed, Bruno cannily named it after the Chanson de Roland, appealing to French pride and perhaps even nativism in order to succeed. But, ultimately, the pattern is clear. Your parents managed to build businesses against the odds and to great effect. In the case of the Roland company in France, part of his success appears to have depended on the fact that in nineteen thirty three, the year of their departure from Germany, your parents still had functioning business interests in Germany despite everything. How did that work?

Charlie Scheidt: That's something that was never really spoken about. As a result of research, I know that my father continued to have a financial interest in the business in Germany. And my parents were not yet married, but my mother would travel back and forth from Frankfurt to Paris. And she was, on many of those trips, a courier to help bring papers and, I believe, money from the business in Frankfurt to my father in Paris.

Joshua Holo: Remarkable that they were able to sustain that.

Charlie Scheidt: And remarkable, if I can add, that my father flees out the door at the end of March thirty three. And by August first nineteen thirty three, he's founded a new company in Paris.

Joshua Holo: I agree. It is remarkable. There are other stories that are remarkable for different reasons. Tell us the heartbreaking story of Aneliza.

Charlie Scheidt: Growing up, I knew this story that my cousin had come over to the US with my parents. I had no idea when her mother, my mother's sister, Ella, came over. In the course of doing the research, I found out that, in fact, Ella had come to the US without her daughter, that she had left her daughter behind in Nazi Germany with my cousin's grandparents and that she had to be snuck out of Germany to the safety of Holland. And the story that I learned is that the only way she got out of Germany alive was that she looked so much like her cousin in Holland that she traveled on this Dutch passport and pretended to be her cousin. She is in in Holland and gets her US visa just in time so that she can travel to the US on the boat with my parents. And that timing not worked so perfectly. I don't know what the fate of my cousin would have been. But the, the prospects are not good.

Joshua Holo: I'd love to close our interview by asking you, what surprised you most in the course of researching and writing this book?

Charlie Scheidt: One of the great surprises and really heartwarming surprises is the extent to which people were willing to be helpful. They had no interest. They had no gain from it. So that was a wonderful surprise. Particular surprises for me, I was very close to my uncle, Max. He was great. He was great fun to be around. I never knew that he had been in a French camp and the effect that it had on him. I did sense a certain tension, anxiety. If I walked somewhere with him, he would hold my arm so tight. It was painful. There was some tension which I sensed, and I never understood the relationship between him and his wife, my aunt Erna. She seemed so domineering. She seemed to boss him around. Why? He's such a nice man. But I, in the course of doing the research, I was so surprised how strong she was and how it was she who really got him out of the French camp. And it was she who really insisted and orchestrated everything so that they got out of France just in time. And I'll just quickly mention one more thing. I had no idea that my paternal grandparents were stuck in France after the fall in France. I thought everybody had come here at the same time. Nobody talked about it. Well, they were stuck in France. And, I mean, there must be a hundred letters from that time about how my parents and my aunt and uncle, how how how were they going to save them? And they only got out in the final analysis because two consular officials in Marseille, France were willing to issue an affidavit in lieu of a visa. Their their names are Hiram Bingham and Miles Standish. And it's only because of their actions and the number, I believe, is something like they issue two thousand five hundred of these visas, and their careers were pretty much over after that as a result. But they saved my grandparents who got out on the last boat out of Marseille and

was, in fact, seized on the high seas. So it was a dramatic exit, but they eventually made it to the US. All of that was a surprise.

Joshua Holo: Well, Charlie Scheidt, thank you so much for the conversation and your story on the College Commons podcast, and congratulations on the publication of your book, *Inheritance, Love, Loss, and the Legacy of the Holocaust*.

Charlie Scheidt: Thank you, Josh. It's been a pleasure.

Joshua Holo: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the College Commons podcast available wherever you listen to your podcasts. And check out HUC Connect, compelling conversations at the forefront of Jewish learning. For more information about all that HUC connect has to offer, visit h u c dot edu slash h u c connect.